

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

RECORD OF DECISION

GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Mount Rainier National Park

Washington

INTRODUCTION

The Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS), has prepared this Record of Decision (ROD) on the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* for Mount Rainier National Park, Washington. This ROD includes a statement of the decision made, synopses of other alternatives considered, the basis for the decision, a description of the environmentally preferable alternative, a discussion of impairment of park resources or values, a listing of measures to minimize environmental harm, and an overview of public involvement in the decision-making process.

DECISION (SELECTED ACTION)

The National Park Service will implement the preferred alternative as described in the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* issued in October 2001. Under the selected action, park managers will improve stewardship of park resources while continuing to provide a range of high-quality visitor experiences. Most of the park (97%) is designated wilderness and will continue to be managed according to the provisions of the Wilderness Act. The primary goals of the preferred alternative are to better manage peak-period visitation so that it does not adversely affect park resources and visitor experiences, and to encourage more off-peak use of the park. Key elements of the plan include the following:

- Establish a visitor carrying capacity framework and use it to ensure the preservation of park resources and the quality of the visitor experience.
- Phase in shuttle services in coordination with elimination of overflow parking to reduce traffic congestion and ensure effective visitor transportation within the park; provide shuttle service to various locations in the park, such as Longmire/Paradise, Westside Road, Sunrise, Mowich Lake, and Carbon River.

- Provide additional opportunities for visitors to use the park in the summer and winter, including: providing shuttles on the Westside Road, providing new picnic sites, improving interpretive facilities, and establishing or improving sno-parks for winter visitors.
- Replace the Henry M. Jackson Memorial Visitor Center at Paradise with a smaller, more efficient visitor center and reconfigure the parking area.
- Improve the visitor information program internally and externally; use welcome centers outside the park to provide visitors information for planning their visits to the park and region.
- Close the Mowich Lake road to visitor traffic about 0.5 mile from the lake to reduce the amount of sediments and pollutants entering the lake.
- Close the Carbon River road to private vehicles when there is a major washout of the road and convert the Ipsut Creek campground to a walk-in/bike-in camping area.
- Recommend a boundary adjustment west of the Carbon River entrance, including about 1,063 acres to provide for a new campground, picnic area, and administrative facilities, and to protect the river corridor. (Congressional action would be required for this action.)

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Two other alternatives for managing Mount Rainier National Park were evaluated in the draft and final environmental impact statements.

The no-action alternative provides a baseline for evaluating the changes and impacts of the three action alternatives. Under the no-action alternative, park managers would continue to manage Mount Rainier as it has in the past, relying on existing plans and policies. No major new construction or major changes would take place, except for previously approved plans or programs, such as constructing a new ranger station and concession facility to replace Sunrise Lodge. All other existing park facilities would continue to be operated and maintained as they have in the past. No visitor carrying capacity or other new visitor management initiatives would be implemented.

Alternative 3 is similar to the preferred alternative in many respects, such as implementing a visitor capacity strategy, phasing in shuttle services and eliminating overflow parking, improving the visitor information program internally and externally, and pursuing a boundary adjustment near the Carbon River entrance. However, alternative 3 would provide a different combination of visitor use opportunities.

Under alternative 3:

- The Henry M. Jackson Memorial Visitor Center would be rehabilitated to meet minimum code requirements and improve the visitor experience.
- Additional parking spaces would be provided at Mowich Lake and Paradise.
- Shuttle service would not be provided to Mowich Lake and along the Westside Road, and a lower level of shuttle service would be provided to White River and Sunrise.
- The Westside Road would be opened to high-clearance private vehicles in the summer.
- The last 0.75-mile of the road to Mowich Lake would be surfaced, parallel parking spaces would be provided along the road, and the camping area at the lake would be reconfigured.
- During the winter State Route 410 would be plowed to the White River entrance, and State Route 123 would be plowed to the Grove of the Patriarchs; sno-parks would be established at each road terminus.

BASIS FOR DECISION

The Organic Act established the National Park Service in order to “promote and regulate the use of parks....” The Organic Act defined the purpose of the national parks as “to conserve the scenery and natural and historic objects and wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such

manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” The Organic Act provides overall guidance for the management of Mount Rainier National Park.

In reaching its decision to select the preferred alternative, the National Park Service considered the purposes for which Mount Rainier National Park was established, and other laws and policies that apply to lands in Mount Rainier National Park, including the Organic Act, the Wilderness Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and the *NPS Management Policies*. The National Park Service also carefully considered public comments received during the planning process.

Each alternative in the *General Management Plan* presents a different framework for managing Mount Rainier National Park. As a result, each alternative would have different impacts on park resources and visitors.

Compared to all of the alternatives considered, the preferred alternative (selected action) best protects park resources while providing a range of quality visitor experiences. The preferred alternative will have both positive and negative impacts on the park’s natural resources, but most of the negative impacts will be minor and localized. Minor to moderate benefits to natural resources will result from the carrying capacity framework and the preservation of forest land in the proposed boundary adjustment. The new management zones will help ensure that a variety of recreational opportunities continue to be available in the park, ranging from pristine wilderness to highly social experiences. Reducing vehicle and parking congestion, providing shuttles, and improving the interpretation and information services will have a moderate to major beneficial effect on visitor experiences.

Unlike the no-action alternative, the preferred alternative addresses issues that have arisen since the master plan was approved in 1974, particularly congestion at major visitor attractions such as Paradise and Sunrise, and changes that have occurred to park infrastructure, such as flood damage that closed the Westside Road. The preferred alternative provides a comprehensive approach for addressing impacts from increasing visitor use. As a result, the preferred alternative will have a positive impact on protecting such resources as air and water quality. In comparison, the no-action alternative does not fully address many of these issues or addresses them in a piecemeal fashion, which would likely result in adverse impacts to park resources. The Carbon River boundary adjustment will have a minor to moderate beneficial effect on natural resources, which would not occur in the no-action alternative. Also, the preferred alternative is expected to have a positive effect on most visitors’ experiences, primarily based on opening the Westside Road, providing a shuttle system to major developed areas, establishing new visitor welcome centers, redesigning parking areas, providing additional picnic sites, and applying the new management zones. These actions will reduce congestion, improve information provided to visitors, improve opportunities to experience solitude and primitive, unconfined recreation in the wilderness area, and expand opportunities to enjoy Mount Rainier. In contrast, the no-action alternative would likely result in a decrease in the quality of visitor experiences, primarily due to increased crowding and congestion, and a lack of convenient information during peak times.

From a management perspective, the preferred alternative also will have several advantages over the no-action alternative. Replacing the Henry M. Jackson Memorial Visitor Center with a smaller more efficient structure will have substantial 25-year life cycle cost savings. Providing better designed parking areas, improving traffic flows, providing better information to visitors before they arrive at the park, reducing areas where pack stock are allowed, prohibiting overflow parking, and closing the Carbon River Road to private vehicles after a major washout, among other actions, should help park staff reallocate time and resources to other pressing tasks.

Alternative 3 would have a higher potential than the preferred alternative to result in several impacts, which is why this alternative was not selected. Alternative 3 would be likely to adversely affect northern

spotted owls nesting near State Route 410 due to winter plowing, while the preferred alternative would not be likely to adversely affect this threatened species. There would be a higher potential for avalanche hazards in alternative 3, posing a risk to visitor and employee safety, because State Route 410 would be kept open in the winter. Alternative 3 would have a higher potential than the preferred alternative for adverse impacts to soils and vegetation in localized areas because more trails would be open to stock use and higher levels of use will be expected at Paradise and Mowich. Impacts to wildlife along the Westside Road would be expected to occur at a higher level in alternative 3, because the road would be open to private vehicles as opposed to shuttles in the preferred alternative.

From a management perspective, the preferred alternative will have several advantages over alternative 3. Replacing the Henry M. Jackson Memorial Visitor Center with a smaller more efficient structure will be more cost-effective than rehabilitating the structure over a 25-year life-cycle period. Also, fewer staff and resources will need to be devoted to managing stock use, maintaining the Westside Road, providing additional parking spaces, plowing roads, and managing winter use (particularly in the vicinity of State Route 410) in the preferred alternative compared to alternative 3.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

Records of decision are required under Council on Environmental Quality regulations to identify the environmentally preferable alternative. Environmentally preferable is defined as “the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in §101 of the National Environmental Policy Act. Section 101 states that “...it is the continuing responsibility of the Federal Government to...

- (1) fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
- (2) assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
- (3) attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
- (4) preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage, and maintain, wherever possible, an environment which supports diversity, and variety of individual choice;
- (5) achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
- (6) enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.”

The environmentally preferable alternative is the NPS preferred alternative in the *Final Mount Rainier National Park General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement*. This alternative satisfies the national environmental goals: the alternative provides a high level of protection of natural and cultural resources while concurrently providing for a wide range of neutral and beneficial uses of the environment. The alternative maintains an environment that supports a diversity and variety of individual choices. And it integrates resource protection with an appropriate range of visitor uses.

The preferred alternative surpasses the other alternatives in realizing the full range of national environmental policy goals in section 101. The no-action alternative does not provide as much resource protection as the preferred alternative — more resource impacts would be expected with increasing use levels in the no-action alternative. Visitor experience impacts also would likely increase under this alternative. Thus, compared to the preferred alternative, the no-action alternative does not meet as well the following national environmental policy goals

- attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation
- preserve important natural aspects and maintain an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice

- achieve a balance between population and resource use

Alternative 3 provides some additional visitor use opportunities and access to Mount Rainier National Park. However, there would be a higher potential for impacts on northern spotted owls — a federally listed threatened and state-listed endangered species — under this alternative compared to the preferred alternative. It also presents greater threats to public health and safety than the preferred alternative: opening State Route 410 in the winter would expose visitors to avalanche hazards. Thus, alternative 3 does not meet the following policy goals as well as the preferred alternative:

- attain the widest range of beneficial uses without resource degradation and risk to health or safety
- preserve important natural aspects
- enhance the quality of renewable resources

FINDINGS ON IMPAIRMENT OF PARK RESOURCES AND VALUES

The National Park Service may not allow the impairment of park resources and values unless directly and specifically provided for by legislation or proclamation establishing the park. Impairment that is prohibited by the NPS Organic Act and the General Authorities Act is an impact that, in the professional judgment of the responsible NPS manager, would harm the integrity of park resources or values, including the opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of those resources or values. In determining whether an impairment would occur, park managers examine the duration, severity and magnitude of the impact; the resources and values affected; and direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the action. According to NPS policy, “An impact would be more likely to constitute an impairment to the extent that it affects a resource or value whose conservation is: a) Necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park; b) Key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the park; or c) Identified as a goal in the park’s general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.”

This policy does not prohibit all impacts to park resources and values. The National Park Service has the discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of a park, so long as the impacts do not constitute an impairment. Moreover, an impact is less likely to constitute an impairment if it is an unavoidable result, which cannot be further mitigated, of an action necessary to preserve or restore the integrity of park resources or values.

After analyzing the environmental impacts described in the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* and public comments received, the National Park Service has determined that implementation of the preferred alternative will not constitute an impairment to Mount Rainier National Park’s resources and values. The actions in the preferred alternative are intended to protect and enhance the park’s natural and cultural resources, and provide for high-quality visitor experiences. Overall, the alternative will have beneficial effects on such resources as air and water resources, soils and vegetation, and historic resources. The alternative will have a positive effect on most visitors’ experiences by reducing crowding and congestion.

From a parkwide perspective, no major adverse impacts to the park’s resources or the range of visitor experiences and no irreversible commitments of resources are expected. While the alternative will have some adverse effects on park resources and visitor experiences, most of these impacts will be site-specific, minor to moderate, short-term impacts. None of the impacts of this alternative will adversely affect resources or values to a degree that will prevent the National Park Service from fulfilling the purposes of the park, threaten the natural integrity of the park, or eliminate opportunities for people to enjoy the park.

MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

The National Park Service has investigated all practical measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from the preferred alternative. Measures to avoid or minimize environmental harm have been identified and incorporated into the preferred alternative and are described in the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement*. These measures are described in the “Direction for the Plan,” in the alternatives chapter, and in the analysis of environmental impacts. Measures to minimize environmental harm include, but are not limited to: applying temporal and spatial restrictions on construction and maintenance activities; siting projects and facilities in previously disturbed or developed locations; restoring habitats using native plant materials; requiring a minimum 2-foot snow depth for winter camping in the wilderness area; conducting surveys of special status species and their habitats and archaeological resources; monitoring changes in the condition of natural and cultural resources; monitoring construction activities; and consulting with the Washington state historical preservation officer and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when appropriate.

ERATA

Corrections to the *Final General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) are listed below. Changes to existing sentences are in **bold**:

COVER PAGE

page v second sentence, last paragraph, change to read: For questions regarding this Plan, contact Mr. Eric Walkinshaw, **Project Manager**, Mount Rainier National Park, Tahoma Woods, Star Route, Ashford, WA 98304-9751 (360-569-2166) or Mr. Larry Beal, Project Manager, Denver Service Center, P.O. Box 25287, Denver, CO 80225-0287 (303-969-2454).

ALTERNATIVE 2: PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE MAP

page 61 under the Sunrise block, delete the entire second bullet which reads: All wilderness campers and overnight climbers would be required to take shuttles.

page 61 under the Paradise block, change the third bullet to read: During peak use periods **shuttle service would be provided for visitors**.

page 81 second column, last sentence, third paragraph under Parking, change to read: This would be partially offset by requiring **NPS and concession** employees to use shuttles.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The National Park Service provided a number of opportunities for the public to participate in the Mount Rainier National Park general management planning process. The planning team primarily used newsletters and meetings to solicit public comments and suggestions for the plan. During the course of

the planning process four newsletters, a supplement to one of the newsletters, and one update letter were sent to the park's mailing list, which consisted of over 1,200 names. Two of the newsletters provided the opportunity for feedback and comments from the public. Planning team members met with various groups about the general management plan, including Pierce and Lewis Counties, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the neighboring national forests, Wilkeson Town Council, and tourism councils, among others. In addition, members of the planning team consulted with and sought the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, Washington state historic preservation officer, Cowlitz Tribe, Muckelshoot Tribe, Nisqually Tribe, Puyallup Tribe, and Yakama Nation.

The comment period on the draft plan ran for 90 days, from November 20, 2000, through February 9, 2001. A notice of availability of the draft document was published in the November 20, 2000, *Federal Register*. The planning team held seven public meetings on the draft environmental impact statement from December 3 through December 8, 2000. Meetings were held in Seattle, Olympia, Tacoma, Encumclaw, Packwood, Yakima, and Eatonville. A total of 173 people attended these meetings. Members of the planning team also met with the five federally recognized Native American tribes, the Tacoma Chapter of the Mountaineers, the four neighboring national forests, and Pierce County to hear their concerns. In addition, 143 comment letters were received during the comment period.

One individual sent in comments via e-mail on the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement* during the 30-day no-action period. No new substantive issues were raised.

The notice of availability for the final environmental impact statement was published in the November 9, 2001 *Federal Register*. The 30-day "no action" period ended on December 10, 2001.

CONCLUSION

Among the alternatives considered, the preferred alternative best protects park resources while also providing a range of quality visitor experiences, meets NPS goals for managing Mount Rainier National Park, and meets national environmental policy goals. The preferred alternative will not result in the impairment of park resources and values. The officials responsible for implementing the selected alternative are the Regional Director, Pacific West Region, and the Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park.

Approved: _____ **Date:** _____

John J. Reynolds
Regional Director, Pacific West Region, National Park Service